

Washington Rural Health Assessment Project

Population Trends in Rural Washington, 1990-2000

Summary

The population structure of rural Washington is changing—sometimes in ways we don't expect. Unlike in much of the rural United States, rural Washington counties are growing. But the growth in rural Washington is not shared equally.

- Large town areas of Washington, such as Moses Lake, grew faster (23%) than the state population as a whole (21%) during 1990-2000. But isolated rural and small town areas in Washington grew by only 1%.
- The urban-rural fringe (rural parts of urban counties) grew at more than twice the state rate. According to the Census Bureau definition of "rural," 40% of Washington's rural population resides in such areas.
- Rural Washington is growing more diverse. The Hispanic and Non-white population in rural areas grew at rates twice to five times those of the total population in most rural counties. The most dramatic growth rates occurred in Central Washington and rural Western Washington.

Although the population of rural areas increased, the population of urban areas, especially areas on the urban fringe, increased much faster. Consequently, rural and town residents as a share of total Washington population dropped from 34% to 27% during the decade.

The Washington Rural Health Assessment Project is a series of monographs on important trends influencing health status and health care access in rural Washington. These monographs are intended to supplement Washington State's Rural Health Plan. Other monographs will cover changes in health care finance, health services infrastructure, and special topics such as aging and nursing home care. These monographs are available on the Office of Community and Rural Health, Health Care Access Research web site:

<http://www.doh.wa.gov/hsqa/ocrh/har/hcresrch.htm>.

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How Washington's Rural Population is Changing

Between 1990 and 2000, Washington gained 1.03 million new residents. Washington State's population grew by 21.1%, the tenth fastest rate of the 50 states. In contrast, U.S. population grew by 13.2%.

Every Washington County, rural or urban, grew in population during the decade. As Table 1 shows, 10 of 26 rural counties grew faster than the state rate, and 21 grew faster than the United States as a whole. (See the monograph, "Rural Definitions for Reimbursement and Program Eligibility" [\[link\]](#) for an explanation of how the U.S. Census Bureau and the Washington State Office of Community of Rural Health define "rural.")

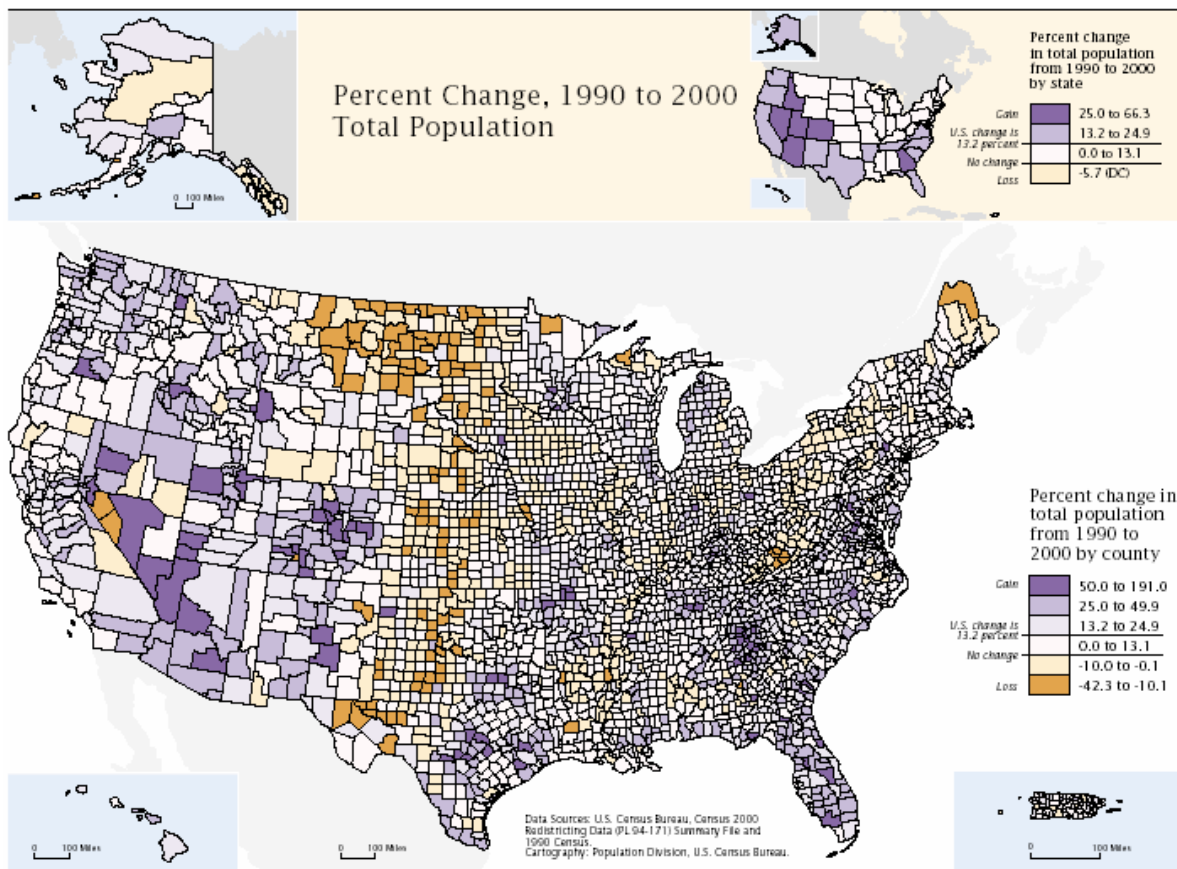
Table 1
Population Growth in Rural Washington Counties, 1990 to 2000

County	1990 Population	2000 Population	Numeric Change	Percent Change
Columbia	4,024	4,064	40	1.0
Grays Harbor	64,175	67,194	3,019	4.7
Whitman	38,775	40,740	1,965	5.1
Garfield	2,248	2,397	149	6.6
Pacific	18,882	20,984	2,102	11.1
Higher than national growth rate				
Walla Walla	48,439	55,180	6,741	13.9
Clallam	56,464	64,525	8,061	14.3
Lincoln	8,864	10,184	1,320	14.9
Wahkiakum	3,327	3,824	497	14.9
Klickitat	16,616	19,161	2,545	15.3
Ferry	6,295	7,260	965	15.3
Lewis	59,358	68,600	9,242	15.6
Asotin	17,605	20,551	2,946	16.7
Okanogan	33,350	39,564	6,214	18.6
Island	60,195	71,558	11,363	18.9
Skamania	8,289	9,872	1,583	19.1
Higher than state growth rate				
Douglas	26,205	32,603	6,398	24.4
Kittitas	26,725	33,362	6,637	24.8
Chelan	52,250	66,616	14,366	27.5
Jefferson	20,146	25,953	5,807	28.8
Mason	38,341	49,405	11,064	28.9
Skagit	79,555	102,979	23,424	29.4
Stevens	30,948	40,066	9,118	29.5
Pend Oreille	8,915	11,732	2,817	31.6
Grant	54,758	74,698	19,940	36.4
San Juan	10,035	14,077	4,042	40.3

Source: U.S. Census Bureau

Unlike Washington's rural counties, many rural counties in the United States lost population during 1900-2000. This is especially true in the Central United States, as the map below shows.

Figure 1
Percent Population Change by County, 1900-2000



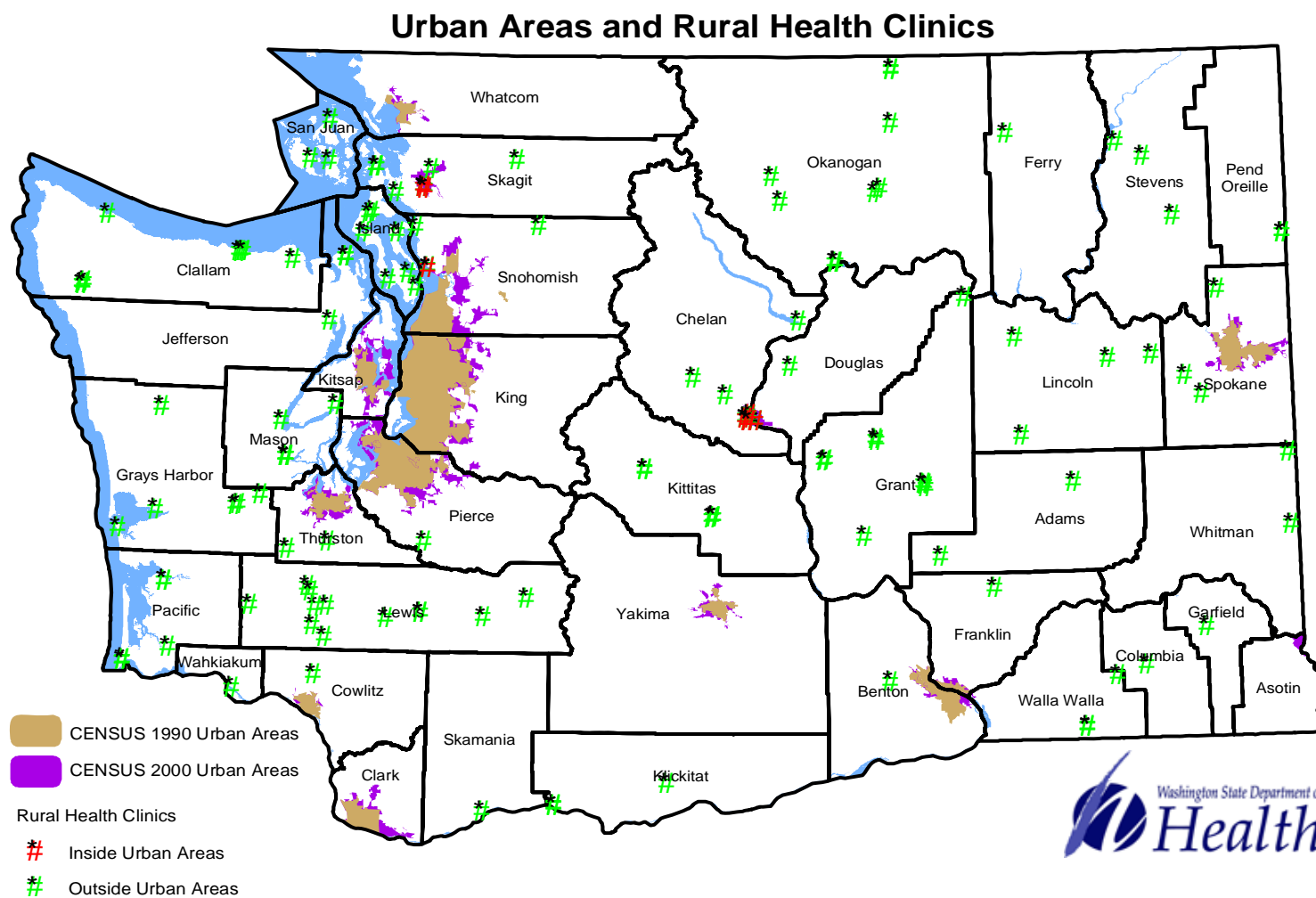
10 Mapping Census 2000: The Geography of U.S. Diversity

U.S. Census Bureau

The Declining Rural Share

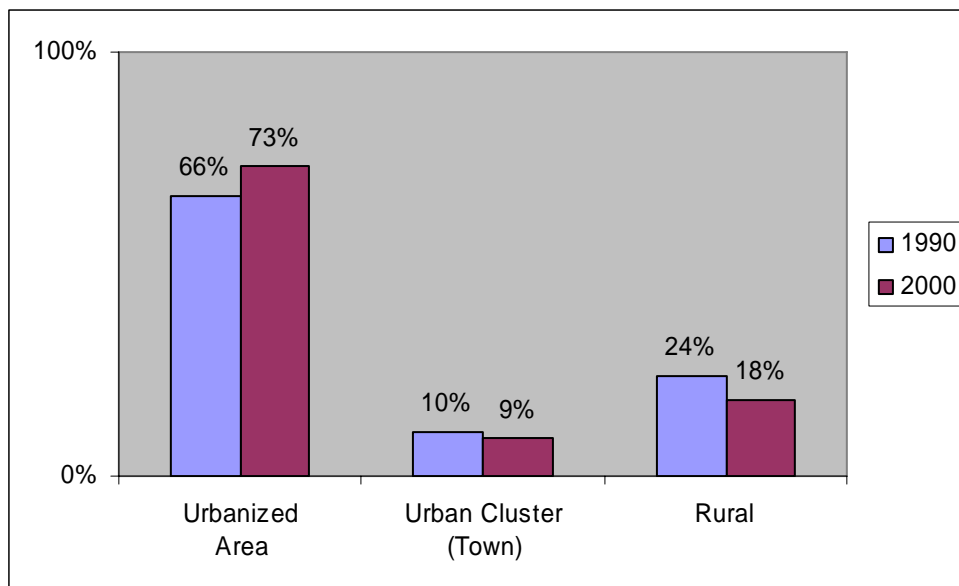
Despite population growth in rural counties, Washington is becoming a less rural state. Urbanized areas, as the Census Bureau defines them, grew by 1.09 million residents during 1900-2000. The fastest growth occurred on the urban fringe. And the state gained three new urbanized areas: Mount-Vernon-Burlington, Wenatchee-East Wenatchee, and Lewiston-Clarkston. The following map shows these trends over the decade.

Figure 2 Washington's Urban Areas, 1900-2000



With the population growth in rural counties offset by urbanization of rural areas on the urban fringe and the formation of new urbanized areas, the number of Washington residents the Census Bureau classifies as rural dropped during 1900-2000. In absolute terms, it dropped by 63,000 people, and as a share of the state population, it declined from 24% to 18%. Although the population in urban clusters (towns between 2,500 and 49,999) increased, the percent of state population in these areas dropped slightly, partly because of the transition of three large towns to urbanized status. The share of the state's population in urbanized areas increased from two-thirds to nearly three-fourths of Washington's population.

Figure 3
Growth in Population's Rural Share by Census Bureau Definition of Rural



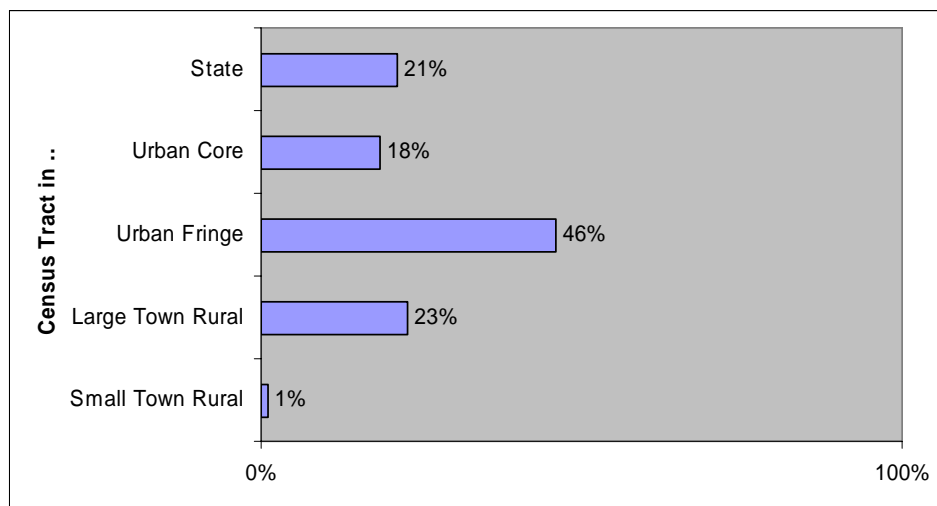
Source: U.S. Census Bureau

Another trend affecting the make-up of Washington's rural population is the continuing concentration in the agricultural sector. Between 1990 and 2000, the number of Washington residents living on farms dropped by 15,000, or from 1.2% to .8% of the state's population. Although much of rural Washington depends on agriculture, most rural residents do not live on farms. Only 2.4% of the state's rural residents lived on farms in 2000, down from 4% in 1990.

Figure 4 on the following page shows that most of the growth in rural Washington between 1990 and 2000 occurred in large town areas, which grew at a rate slightly higher than the state average. Growth in small town and isolated rural areas was stagnant. The rural-urban fringe grew at more than twice the statewide rate. Much of the growth in the urban-rural fringe occurred because of expansion of urbanized areas. But the non-urbanized areas on the fringe also grew dramatically.

In 2000, 40% of Washington's rural and urban cluster (town) population resided in urban fringe areas—31% in large town areas and 22% in small town/rural areas. The remaining 7% of the rural population lived in small pockets of rural population in mostly urbanized areas. The percent of the rural population in urban fringe areas and large town areas grew from 1990 levels at 37% and 29%, respectively.

Figure 4
Population Growth by Rural Urban Commuting Area Classification
Washington, 1990-2000

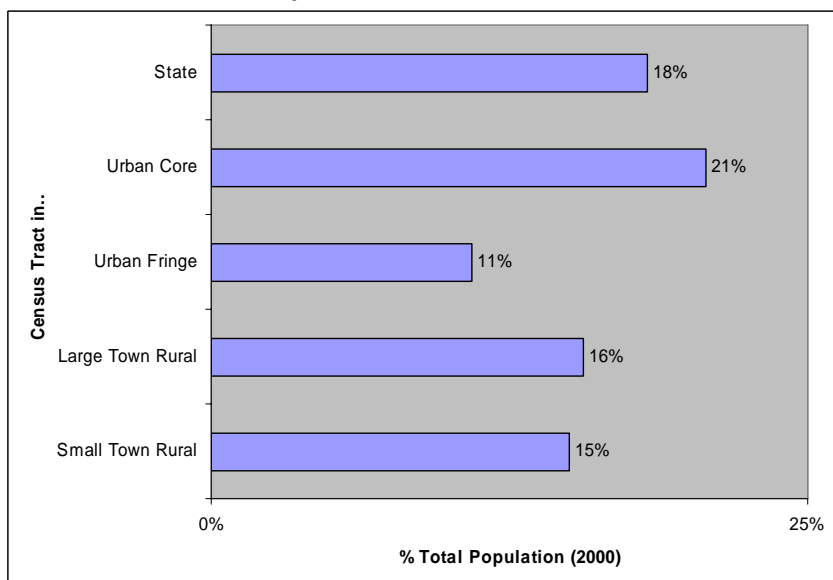


Source: U.S. Census Bureau

Rural Areas Are Increasing In Diversity

The rural areas of Washington are slightly less racially diverse than urban areas, as measured by the percent of Non-white population.

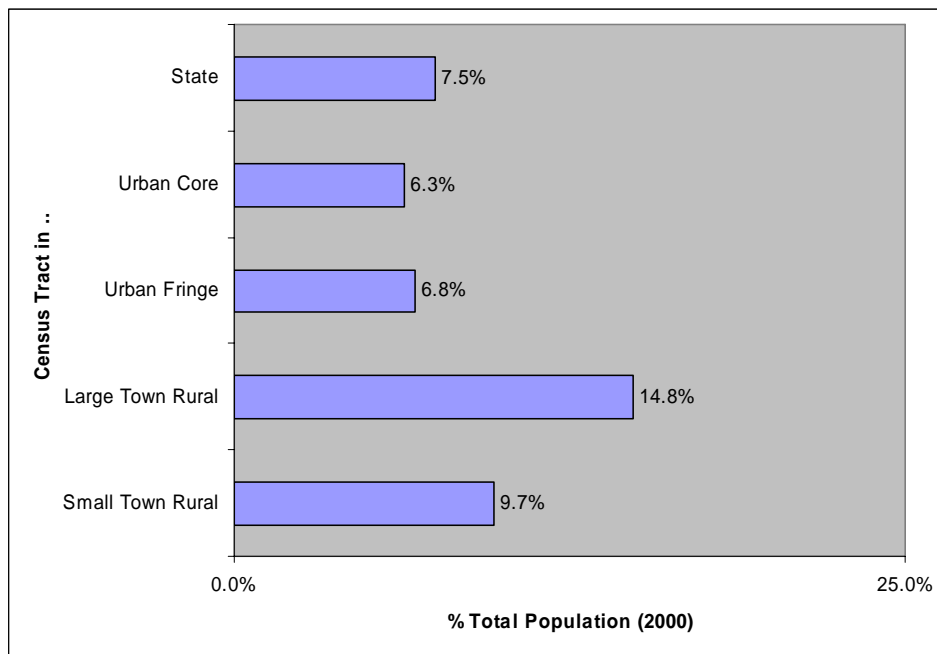
Figure 5
Percent Non-White by Rural Classification



Source: U.S. Census Bureau

But in rural areas, especially the large town rural areas of Central Washington, the Hispanic population is more prevalent than in urban areas.

Figure 6
Percent Hispanic Population by Rural Classification, 2000



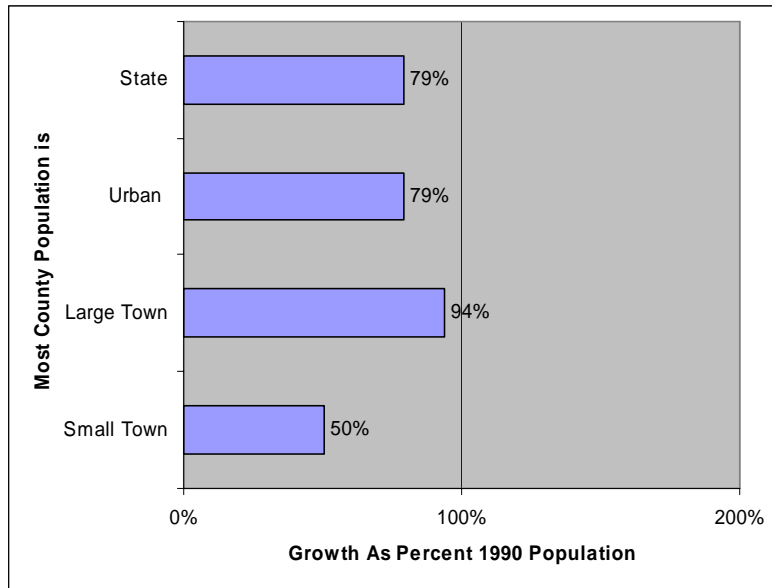
Source: U.S. Census Bureau

The Non-White and Hispanic populations in all areas of the state grew faster than the state's average population growth rate of 21%. The Non-white population of small town rural areas grew more slowly than in urban areas but at twice the state's average rate and faster than the rate of overall population growth for small towns (1%). But in most small town areas, less than 5% of the population is Non-white. The growth rate of the Non-white population in large town areas was nearly five times the state average and overall growth rate for large town areas (23%).

Washington's Hispanic population grew at a rate more than five times the state average. As with Washington's Non-white population, the Hispanic population's growth rates were higher than the state rates in large town areas and lower in small town areas. In both cases, the growth rate was higher than that for the overall population. Although the Hispanic and Non-white population growth rates were dramatic and an important contributor to population growth in rural Washington, in most rural counties, the Hispanic and Non-white population represented less than 5% of the total population. (The major exception was Central Washington.)

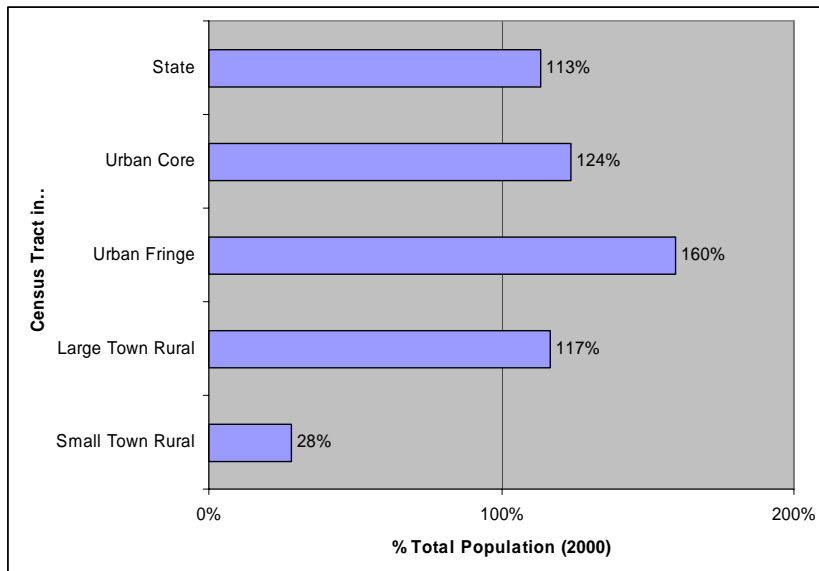
Figures 7 and 8 on the following page show these trends.

Figure 7
Growth of Non-white Population by Rural County Type



Source: U.S. Census Bureau

Figure 8
Growth of Hispanic Population by Rural Classification



Source: U.S. Census Bureau

Technical Notes

Definitions of rural: Comparisons of demographic trends over time in rural areas is complicated. In addition to the population growth or decline, the specification of “rural” is a moving target. Not only are there different systems for classifying what is rural, but also, the classification methods within each system have changed since 1990, as has the underlying geography (Census tract numbering and boundaries). Some caution should be exercised when making comparisons over time, since some of the change over time is the result of changes in definitions and classification schemes. This monograph classifies the rural areas using two methods, the Census Bureau definition of urbanized area, urban cluster (town) and rural area, and the Rural Urban Commuting Area (RUCA) system. For a more detailed discussion of alternate rural classification methods see

<http://www.doh.wa.gov/Data/Guidelines/RuralUrban.htm>. While these methods are related, they are not interchangeable.

The Census Bureau classifies an urbanized area as a “densely settled area” with a population greater than 50,000. In May 2001, the Census Bureau modified the criteria for identifying continuously built-up areas. See http://www.census.gov/geo/www/ua/ua_2k.html for a detailed discussion of changes. The Census Bureau also identifies urban clusters (or towns), densely settled areas with populations between 2,500 and 49,999. All other areas are classified as rural. These definitions are determined at the Census block level. (Several Census blocks make up a Census tract.)

The RUCA system classifies Census tracts using Census Bureau definitions of urbanized areas and urban clusters to define urbanized areas, large town (10,000 to 49,999) and small town (2,500 to 9,999) core areas, and isolated rural areas. Adjacent Census tracts are defined on the basis of their commuting relationship (greater the 30% commuting) to these core areas. Individual Census tracts are classified into 10 major classes, ranging from urban core to isolated rural areas. For a detailed description of this system, see <http://www.fammed.washington.edu/wwamirhrc/>. The use of Census tracts rather than Census block groups means that there is not a 100% correspondence between RUCA classification and Census definitions of rural. For example, in 1990, 11% of the Census-defined rural population resided in areas the RUCA system defined as urbanized.

For this analysis, we consolidated the 10 RUCA classes into four: urban core areas, urban-rural fringe areas (areas with a strong commuting relationship to urban cores), large town areas and related commuter sheds, and small town and isolated rural. The current RUCA system was built using 1990 Census tracts and commuting data and is currently being revised. The update is expected out in late 2003. Consequently, when we compare changes over time, we are comparing what has changed within areas that were classified as urban, urban-fringe, large town, and small town in 1990. For example, as mentioned in the text, three large town areas in the state were reclassified as urbanized in the 2000 Census. In the RUCA-based analyses, these areas remain in the large town category. This is a not-unreasonable assumption because the population in these areas grew from slightly less than 50,000 to slightly more than 50,000. But the population in these areas moved from urban cluster to urbanized area in comparisons based on the Census definitions.

Finally, Census tract boundaries were renumbered and in some cases redrawn between 1990 and 2000. This does not affect Census definitions and comparisons, which are made at a smaller level of geography. The RUCA system was built using 1990 Census tracts. To allow comparisons between Census years, 1990 RUCA codes for Census tracts were overlaid on 2000 RUCA codes. In most cases, boundary changes did not affect RUCA codes. Portions of 60 of the state’s 1,318 Census tracts in 2000, covering less than 1% of the state’s population, were affected. These tracts were manually assigned to the RUCA code with the largest population.

Comparisons of the Non-White population: The Census Bureau allowed persons to choose more than one race in the 2000 Census, a change from 1990. Direct comparison between Census years cannot be made without assigning those reporting multiple races to a single category. These bridging methods are only reliably determined at the county level; sub-county comparisons are not available.